

Of Books and Tentacles

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Of Books and Tentacles

by [Searofyr](#)

Summary

From the journal of Lothryn Simero, House Telvanni, Apocrypha 2E.

Lothryn, unknowing Nerevarine, got a warning to get out of Nirn for a while due to post-Dragon-Break complications threatening his existence. Luckily, he recently got involved with Divayth Fyr, who knows a perfectly safe hiding place: Apocrypha.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

[A black book bound in leather of inscrutable provenience, embossed with tentacles.]

And here we are.

Beautiful Apocrypha.

To honour the long-pursued opportunity of visiting this magnificent realm, I have begun a new journal. May it speak of the splendours sought and found during this most fortuitous journey.

No, not exactly.

I've tried all my life to stay away from all things Divine or Daedric in nature. No pursuit of knowledge in all of Nirn could have gotten me to venture to Apocrypha and get entangled with Hermaeus Mora (entangled, see, this is the first of many tentacle jokes to come). Cause only an idiot would do that.

An idiot, or me and my partner, after I got a warning by the Hist to get myself out of Nirn for a while. (Complicated dragon break business my apprentice knows more about than I ever will.)

When you get that kind of warning, that's usually easier said than done. Fortunately for me, I happen to have fallen for someone with access to a number of realms, and with a very welcome protective streak towards me. How I've earned that I don't know, but he got us here. I'm not saying how. He's got his methods.

What did we bring? Some provisions, magical equipment, clothing and armour made to withstand some specific local threats – Great House Telvanni always provides and always knows what they're doing; one reason I worked my way in here. Maybe one day I, too, will know what I'm doing.

Furthermore, my Psijic wolf Sadis (gift from my apprentice), and our pocket watcher Sulan (gift/shared pet from my lover). I had my doubts about bringing them along on this kind of trip. My companion said, "One thing I have learned in dealing with the forces of Oblivion is that if you truly care about something, you don't let it out of your sight. Nothing is more likely to disappear on you than that which you leave behind for its own safety."

So we brought pets to this couple's outing. Why not?

Other protection includes the sign of the Serpent tattooed on one hand and wrist each after a recent

run-in with Lorkhan and his tiny Bosmer representative Riakil. Neither of us is much for religion typically. But getting rescued from certain death was a very convincing sales-pitch for me, and my partner proved to be either very pragmatic or very sentimental or maybe some of both, and joined the vaguest contract imaginable.

This promptly caused a comment by the master of the realm as soon as we set foot in here.

“Trying to steal away from me, Divayth? An awakening Lorkhan. Pah. You always were an opportunist. And he always had a habit of picking the most promising mortals for himself. And you didn’t bring me the other mortal with you either, this time. Another of Lorkhan’s. Then tell me. What do you want?”

“Temporary asylum for the two of us,” Divayth said. “And don’t act so vexed. You always knew this was only going to be a mutually beneficial business relationship. The fact that two of us show up here despite all should interest you, shouldn’t it? To all knowledge at my disposal, this does not happen often.”

A booming laugh resounded in the library walls. “There is some truth to that. The newcomer. Let me see. Yes... Yes, this is intriguing. And what do you bring, if not yourselves? Do not presume to tell me you can bring me a pup or my own creature.”

“I regret to say nobody in this company is a tribute,” Divayth replied. “The wolf belongs to Lothryn. The watcher belongs to Lothryn and me. Lothryn belongs to me.”

I raised an eyebrow at that but didn’t say anything. Let him do the negotiating. This was his specialty.

“Then what?” the voice rang.

“Knowledge about the recent dragon break. I doubt the Psijic order is very forthcoming about chats on the topic. Does this suffice?”

A booming interested noise covered the halls. “Then what do you seek?”

“We seek to make a living here for a certain time span. Asylum, every provision we need, no alteration to ourselves nor claims on us or any parts of ourselves nor our possessions. The equivalent to an inn in temporary exile. Those are the general terms. If you’re interested, let’s lay out the details.”

A dark hum, and then assent.

The details are so ridiculously specific I won’t put them down here.

As for why this is a new journal, it’s not out of any sentiment to honour the beauty of the place.

Back home, Divayth asked to read my previous one. He insisted it was relevant to our upcoming journey. With some apprehension and some interest in the situation I let him.

I enjoyed his smiles at some of the pages, and even more the different smiles at the pages talking about him. Of course he’d like those.

When he was done, he concluded, “You give away too much of value in your writing. This volume needs to stay out of Apocrypha so that we have more of a bargaining basis. Any book brought into

Apocrypha would be his by design. I still suggest you continue journaling when we get there. It can help you retain your sanity, should it ever slip. But I'll tell you exactly what you can and cannot write while there. If you're not sure, ask me."

Then he gave me this empty one. Said, "I took it along from there once from a number of empty books to be filled in the future. One of their denizens traded it to me for some minor secrets. An oddity I thought to keep as a souvenir. But it's in better hands with you."

We're in a backroom of one of the countless libraries, unless you want to count this whole realm as one library. This room, as do all of them, contains books and shelves and unexplained shadowy tentacles, but also the amenities you expect from a regular dwelling place for mortals. It's ours for the duration of our stay.

Divayth was watching me, and now said, "While I'm pleased that you're writing in this, it's enough for the night, isn't it?"

I said, "You know, where you're right, you're right."

And so I conclude this first entry.

I am Lothryn Simero of Great House Telvanni, and as all unorthodox ideas Divayth Fyr is involved in, this promises to be most interesting.

Chapter 2

The first night has passed, or what counts for night here; in fact, I suspect it's just a remnant of our sense of the passage of time that we brought with us.

Got to say, after all the excitement and hectic preparations of the past weeks, and being surrounded by all that nature and all those people, much as I appreciate some of them, there's nothing like being finally left alone in a library.

Divayth doesn't count as 'people'; his presence improves everything.

I looked over to him, and something about my thoughts must have shown, because he came over, read over my shoulder what I'd written, and said, "I'm glad to see it's mutual."

Normally in a library you'd also comment on the silence, but that doesn't apply here. While our room isn't being used by anyone else I can identify as a sentient creature, even the books and the shelves and the shadow tentacles give off their own noises and whispers. But when you don't understand them, at first they're a strain, and then you get used to them and drown them out.

He was reading over my shoulder again. Asked, "Do you not wonder what they're saying?"

I said, "People are people. I bet if I understood, it'd turn out to be akin to Lilmoth. Where what I heard from outside my room was just a lot of gossip, oh and a guy badly wooing a girl, and describing her eyes to puddles of mud. That was memorable at least. It'd just be the tentacle person variant."

He raises an eyebrow. "A take one doesn't often hear once someone is here."

I leaned closer. "Your eyes are as plentiful as the paragraphs in this book on guar property laws."

I think he gave a hint of laughter. "Well, at least you're not unduly impressed. That will be helpful to you here. Speaking of books. We've been here since yesterday, and you have not picked up a single one of them. You're a mage and a researcher, and a curious one who seeks uncommon knowledge to that. Enlighten me why. You can't expect guar property laws behind each of those covers."

"You're more interesting."

"The fact that you can even say that as a joke bodes well for your chances to make it out again with your sanity intact."

"That was no joke. Not only."

He grinned. "I know. I certainly try."

"I know, and you succeed. But you're right, we'll be here for a while. Well, for one, this contains all the knowledge that Hermaeus Mora assembled in book form, right? That means a high percentage of these will indeed be things like guar property laws. The other thing... I was going to talk to you about that anyway."

“Do tell.”

“He greeted us personally, in that charming manner, and he gave us this room. And he’ll be paying attention and trying to get something out of this beyond what we’ve told him, right? So how could I not expect every single book in this room to be aimed at us somehow? I want to be cautious.”

“Not the worst course of action. And more restraint than I’ve seen in anyone else. I may have just been right in choosing this realm for our stay.”

I leaned against him. “I love compliments from you.”

“I know.” He ran his fingers through my hair. Can’t get enough of that, and he knows that, too.

“Can I write this kind of conversation down? Not this last part, that shouldn’t be a problem, I hope; the parts about Apocrypha and Hermaeus Mora.”

Divayth made a dismissive gesture with his free hand. “He knows. If we say it here, he knows. Write it down. It can be a reminder if things start to look less clear. And should we succumb to this realm after all, and the journal end in gibberish, he’ll appreciate the dramatic irony.”

Chapter 3

I love how slowly time moves. If it moves at all. Does time have meaning here? The subjective meaning we give it and that we bring with us without meaning to.

Divayth eventually picked up a book, something transliminal, saying that anything more than the approved basics are a tedious effort to find in Tamriel, especially when one doesn't care to stay within the approved boundaries that would keep one in certain inner circles. "Not impossible, but tedious."

So I looked around myself. Couldn't decide on anything. Flinched back from every black-covered book before pulling it out of the shelf.

"Do you want me to recommend you something?" Divayth asked.

"You could," I said, but I know there was doubt in my voice. I eyed the books in the shelf next to me, then him.

He was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "No, you're right. Don't trust me in this. Trust your own judgment."

I was close to making a joke about where my own judgment had gotten me, but then changed course and decided on the opposite. "Brought me to you. Can't be so bad after all."

He still doesn't like to show the smile and the flashing in his eyes too much, but he didn't make more than a half-hearted effort at hiding them either. "Talking like that... Miss my attention already?"

"Always."

"Always, huh."

"Time moves differently in Oblivion, right? By my subjective perception of local time, it's been an eternity."

That earned me something between a scoff and a laugh. "The fact that I even respond to a line like that..." He put the book on transliminal something to the side, quickly forgotten, and approached me. I leaned back against the whispering shelf and watched him with interest.

He reached out his hand, combed it through my hair. I wanted to close my eyes and watch him at the same time. When I didn't move away, his arm trapped me against the shelf. "What do you do to me?" he muttered. "This isn't quite normal."

I inhaled and bent my head to kiss along his neck. "What about this is?"

"You do make a good point sometimes."

"It hasn't escaped my notice," I said later, "that you're also trusting my judgment."

"Am I now?"

“Why don’t we shelve that book again in a while?”

He gave me a mock-cranky look that I know better than to take seriously. “For what, a recipe volume?”

“Why not? I can learn to make us a Colovian stew. We can’t eat anything transliminal. I think. Or I bet it’d be very ill-advised.”

He smiled and caressed my face, then lay back. “Fine. On any particular grounds, or a general murky bad feeling?”

“Murky bad feeling. I get those.”

“I know you do. I’ll go along. Why not?”

“Thanks.” I kissed his jaw and lay against him. “You’ve stopped touching me.”

“Oh, now we can’t have that. But first of all...” He got up and put the volume back into the shelf. “Content?”

“Almost.”

The grin he shot me seemed lighter than before.

Am I wrong?

When I woke up (it starts to sound ridiculous to write “this morning”), Divayth handed me a black book, tentacle-embossed, the usual. Saying “You might like this.”

I flipped open the cover.

‘Alik’r Home Cooking – Bring the Desert Home Wherever You Are’ by Ravalla at-Nurabn.

I snorted. Almost turned the page. Then I paused. “Bit too convenient, isn’t it? Where’d you find this?”

He raised an eyebrow, stayed still otherwise. “This room, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Then we shouldn’t.”

“Are you actually implying Hermaeus Mora will plot our downfall via a volume about Alik’r home cooking?”

I closed the book out of some superstitious feeling. “You’re the one who knows him better than I do, and you’re the Daedra expert. But why not?”

“Oh please.”

“He certainly knows how to trap people. And we’re being wary now, aren’t we? How do you trap the mighty geniuses that think they’re too smart for your tricks? Alik’r home cooking. And then you have a good laugh about it. Besides, it was you who said he’d enjoy dramatic irony.”

He just shook his head, picked up the book, put it back into a shelf and left.

Stupid confession: I just want to cry.

Alright, stupid confession number two: I actually did cry.

This is ridiculous. But if I’m not being idiotically paranoid but right, then this is not the time to start condoning reading these books to send a message of goodwill, and come crawling back.

It’s difficult, though. The endless issue: The only way not to be miserable and not to want to be a push-over is to stay away from people I might care about.

Chapter 5

To Divayth's credit, he came back soon after.

"Help me understand," he said. Looked at me more closely, came up to the divan I was sulking on and wrapped me up in his arms.

"This is so stupid," I muttered just while clinging to him for dear life and feeling the tears well up again. "Really, really stupid." And in a lower voice and to my considerable embarrassment, "Don't be mad at me."

He held me more tightly. "That's what I should be saying. Unfortunately, I'm not good at that."

"Neither am I. You're the exception, and it's terrifying."

"Don't I know that feeling." He pulled back a bit. "Don't worry anymore. I'm not mad. The annoying part is that you're not wrong." Kissed me then.

The world was slowly fixing itself. Embarrassing without end.

"*Now* help me understand," he said at last and sat back on the divan. "There's healthy paranoia, which serves you well when dealing with Oblivion, and then there's this. You're naturally curious. Yet since we've been here, you've been oscillating between rigidity like that and expecting only the most banal. Why is that?"

"Because I heard our host greet you," I said. "He already expects you to become his, and to be halfway there. It's obvious. And you're smart, you must know. I bet you know. You just want to read the books, and want to see what you can get away with. Of course you do, cause it's natural. Well, you're here for me, and you know the danger you're in – because you're not stupid – and still took that risk to get me safe. So it's now my role to keep you safe, too. And if it's against yourself. Keep you grounded."

He mustered me. "Just because you're not wrong," he began at last, "doesn't mean people necessarily want to hear what you have to say."

"Yeah, but you're of particular intellect, and you're pragmatic. I'll just have to trust you to listen."

"Dangerous."

"Oh please."

He raised an eyebrow. "You don't think so?"

"What are you going to do? Read behind my back? Look, we may both be petty and difficult people, but let's not be outright childish."

"*That's* the danger you see?"

I sighed. "Look, you're here for me. If you change your mind, and decide you want knowledge more than me, you can easily sell me out. I know Mora showed at least *some* interest. Can't imagine why, but on the other hand he hasn't had a lot of mortal visitors lately, unless you bring them. He must be bored. Sure, you could do that. But you won't."

He gave me a slow smile. “I won’t, will I?”

“I’ll take the liberty to say, I know how you talk to me and I know how you hold me, and I know what you’re like... you know. You’re caught in this thing we’ve got same as I am. And you’ve got some decency. You won’t sell me out. So then what? Argue forever? That’s not how I want to spend my time here.”

His smile transformed into a guarded stare, and then he was shaken with silent laughter. “And again you’re right. So where would you draw the line?”

“Easiest one,” I said, not sure where it came from, but it seemed to make sense at the moment so I said it. “None.”

“None. By that you mean...”

“No book. None. No line between anything. Cause those want to be overstepped. Let’s just not read anything.”

He looked at me as if I’d grown a few tentacles. “You are saying we go to Apocrypha, with considerable effort, I’ll have you know, even though of course I make it look effortless... and read no books at all? Not a single one?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“Give me a better explanation than the one you’ve given me so far. I’m touched you care about my well-being, but this is... You know that I’ve read here before.”

“And did you pay for it?”

He turned quiet, his face took on a pensive note.

“I heard your conditions you set up with him. All the details. Painfully detailed details. The knowledge we gave him pays for all kinds of practical things, food, lodging, amenities, safety, not being attacked by anyone here, that kind of thing. Correct? Well done, by the way. Probably a better deal than many permanent mortal residents get here. Your former associate Zenan had to flee from the habitants. If he can be believed.”

“I’ve brought it up before, yes. So you have an idea about what happened there.”

“I can make an educated guess.”

“Yet you’re here with me,” he stated. “Well, I’m listening, and I think I know where you’re headed with this.”

“We didn’t pay for knowledge, reading, library fees, anything like that. Which makes me think that’s going to cost extra, and we didn’t set the price. He will.”

He watched me. “You really are saying it. And seriously.”

“I know, I know, you don’t want to hear it. But the temptation is just cause the books are here. If we’d gone to another realm, there’d be no books.”

He smiled. “Your argument is getting weaker again. Still, no one gets trapped from reading a few books. Or at least most people don’t.”

“No one gets trapped from not reading any.”

“By Oblivion, you are serious. Let me think about it.”

“Stay in the room this time.”

He leaned over and kissed me. “I will. Even though you ask the impossible.”

“On the other hand, it would be the most interesting thing to do here. Anyone can read and get lost. Who comes here and doesn’t read anything?”

His lips twitched. “Illiterate idiots.”

“Or the greatest wizards to ever live.”

“Count yourself in the number already?”

“I’m with you,” I said, “over the years it’ll be hard to avoid.”

He leaned over me, pushed me back and down on the divan’s surface. Of course he liked to hear that. “And what would you suggest we do all this time? Except for the obvious, for which I know I’m giving you ideas right now.”

I grinned through the haze he was putting me into and hooked my finger into his robe collar. “Of course you’re right as always. Besides that, well... You know, I was looking forward to this, too. Library with you, learning together, finally peace, talking about everything we find...”

“So I wasn’t alone after all.”

Somehow that confession tore at my heart and made me wrap my arms around him and pull him close.

He followed the demand with a sigh and pressed up against me.

“Of course you weren’t alone,” I said. “Let’s see. Be practical, right? Well, we can talk. Between us, we should have plenty of knowledge assembled, you a few thousand years’ worth more than me, but we should be fine. And then... I’ll admit I’m not used to being around people I can stand to be around a lot. What does one do? Card games?”

He finally laughed against me. “We’ll find something. No books. Well.” He kissed my ear, making me gasp, so of course he continued, biting softly and then harder.

I clung to him, coherence slipping from my grasp.

“I bet,” he said, “if I took you further than this, just a bit, or maybe a lot further, I could convince you of anything.”

I clutched at the back of his head; anchorage. “I still couldn’t relent. Cause of this.”

He backed off a little, looking interested.

“You’re the one person I love and who knows how to handle me. I can’t lose you. Too much of a loss.”

A smile spread on his lips. “Well.” He stroked down the side of my face, caressed my ear, making me lean into his touch. “Then you won’t.”

“Topic done?” I asked, noticing how strained my voice was. “Off the table? No more? No books in

Apocrypha?”

“Fine, we’ll do as you say,” he said at last. “No books in Apocrypha. Looks like you win.”

“Good. Now, if we leave out this far too serious context you put it in, you just started something interesting there.”

He resumed his caress. “This part? Or something more?”

I grinned, stretching out beneath him, finally getting at ease. “This and something more. I don’t know how or what or... anything really, but the convincing part sounded...”

He matched my grin and mustered me. “I’m thinking this is, and you are, interesting enough to make this doable.”

Chapter 6

The thing when you've suddenly declared you're going to spend your time talking is you don't know what to talk about.

So today (today? Is it?) we ended up taking a walk through the corridors. The denizens are neutral and non-aggressive towards us, which is rather impressive actually.

We found more rooms like our own, abandoned mostly, cause traffic has been low since Sotha Sil's contract that nobody knows about except that it exists. I say "mostly" cause one room was occupied by a wild-haired and dull-eyed wood elf named Rowanith (she remembered that much), who was first pleased to see us newcomers, then, standing in her doorway, talked a little sense and then didn't so much anymore. In the end she was muttering in a language I've never heard. We said our goodbyes, and she locked herself in again.

We headed back to our room. On the way, Divayth shot me side glances on and off.

Then he said, passing one abandoned room, "Let's have a look."

So we did. Quite recently abandoned by the look of it. Divayth was drawn in by a number of liquor bottles. Looked at me again. Sighed and asked into the room, "Will there be an extra charge for this, or is this included?"

Silence.

Then Mora's amused voice answered. "Consider it included."

"Just these bottles, or will we have a steady supply like we do of food?"

"Negotiating terms afterwards. How like you. But I will include it. It will be amusing to see how long you can stem the tide of knowledge with empty worldly pleasures."

"Thank you," Divayth simply said, and the conversation was over.

Back in our room, he placed the bottles on the low centre table surrounded by cushions in old-fashioned Dunmeri style. Almost feels like home, this place, very considerate of them to pay attention to who is visiting and have something appropriate ready.

"I'm afraid I don't remember any card games that are of any entertainment value to me," he said, "but over the years I've learned my fair share of drinking games that you might enjoy. The ones that are about drinking or socialising, and the ones that veer into territory one could call indecent."

I grinned at him. "With you, that all sounds excellent."

He leaned in, causing my heart to beat faster already, damn it all. "I thought so."

"How do you always do that?" I muttered.

"Do what?" His fingers trailed along my jawline, twisting the tip of my beard between them.

"Make me go absolutely crazy with what you do to me."

He just smiled. Like he does sometimes in these situations.

“You know,” I said, “I usually don’t drink a lot.”

“All the better. As you may have guessed, I like to win.”

I had to grin again. “Never would have thought.”

He reached for the back of my neck, caressed me briefly, then changed to a harsh grip, looked into my eyes. “And you won that last one. With an ease that still puzzles me. We’ll go home and tell the tale of it, too. Now let me repay you.”

He has ways of making my reason blank out, and so I escaped his grip to lean in and urgently kiss him. When we broke off, I whispered, “I can’t wait.”

He gave a ragged sigh. “How are you so perfectly what I want? What do you do—” Then he was kissing me again, as if to cut off his own words.

Chapter 7

There are games of chance.

We found dice in the room we'd also gotten the bottles from. I voiced my grim curiosity about the fate of the probably-recent occupant.

Mora was quick to answer with a question of his own: "Do you want the answer, little mortal?"

I did, in a gruesomely fascinated way and perhaps to avoid a similar fate, but said "No, we didn't pay for that information, so we don't want to know."

"You speak for your friend, too?"

"Right now, and in this, I do."

He laughed. "Perhaps I should focus on you then. I will enjoy watching that resolve crumble. You will be my servant before long. I can be patient."

"Not happening," I said, and we left the premises.

I've never been very lucky, but it seems worse now than ever. Absolutely rotten luck at dice.

Same went for Divayth, though.

Soon we were both more drunk than we'd intended or anticipated, but the rules are the rules and must be followed; there must be order after all.

Then, once when I was throwing the dice with my left hand for a change, my eyes caught the tattoo on my hand. My movement stalled.

Divayth was watching me, looked at my hand, looked at his own.

The sign of the Serpent.

"Most blessed and most cursed", I quoted. "Thanks, Lorkhan."

Divayth scoffed. "You're quite superstitious, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid I am. Well, at least now we know this is working. Now if we could get the 'most blessed' part, too..."

"If you want to take the argument that way, we *are* still here playing dice, and we are talking in intelligible language."

"At least we think we are," I said. "Who knows what we'd sound like to a newcomer."

Mild amusement on his face. "Throw your dice."

I did. Worst throw. I tapped at the back of my tattooed hand with the other. "I'm expecting that protection for the two of us, you hear me?"

"And I'm expecting you to drink," Divayth said. "Unless you say you've hit your limit."

“Not yet. I think. The room’s only a little blurry, and part of that is the tentacles.”

Chapter 8

There are games of telling truths or drinking, or telling the truth by drinking.

A simple one even I know is to ask whether someone has done a certain thing, and for those who have to drink. In the more and less decent versions.

“An opportunity for telling our life stories,” Divayth said of the decent version. “If we wanted to.”

“I want to hear about you,” I said. “Or, you know, we could try talking like normal people about those things over time. I don’t know, where do you see our chances for that?”

His eyes flashed with a smile. “We could make the attempt. And then resort to the drinking game in case of failure.”

“That’s a plan.”

“Then the less decent version? But I’m afraid...”

“Well,” I said, “it’s one I at least have a chance at winning. A few thousand years is a lot, and I know you’re popular.” I frowned. “Which is all fine with me in general. We’ve got our promises now and all. But I think... Hearing it concentrated like that would just put me in a grumpy and jealous mood after all. Even if it’s stupid.”

He looked at me thoughtfully. His eyes were as sharp as before, no softening or overflowing sentiment or anything one might expect perhaps. He rather looked like I’ve seen him look when he makes weighty decisions on spell strategies or Daedric dealings.

Then he reached out his hand and stroked through my hair. “I’m going to do something exceptional. But before, I’ll ask you again. You really care that much about me? And you really want this to last?”

“Yes and yes. Don’t know where this is heading, but those are easy to answer.”

He nodded and pursed his lips. “Then I’ll take the risk and swear to you there’ll be no one else. Only you, for eternity. Now don’t disappoint me.”

“I’m stunned,” I said, because I was. “And the mage in me is noticing, you’re saying there’s a risk. So there’s a tangible risk to oaths, that’s interesting and you’ll have to tell me about that. But first of all I swear the same. Only you, no one else in eternity.” Noticed I was trembling.

“You hear there’s a risk and swear anyway. I like that about you.” He leaned in, almost close enough to kiss me. “I like a lot about you.”

“I love you,” I said, and then he kissed me.

“See,” I said at last, “we *can* talk like normal people. Well, almost normal. I suspect this is still very... us. Which is good by me.”

He smiled. “A more interesting variety of the game, and one that would put us on more equal ground, is the question of what one would be *interested* in doing.”

Didn’t need the Serpent’s curse to be drunker than the night before.

Chapter 9

I don't know how long it's been. But times are good.

Divayth cancelled the liquor deliveries after that one night (night?) saying they're uninteresting now, and I agreed. We carried on without.

We've started actually talking, too. By which I mean we always did, but in limited dosages, and now the limits have been mostly removed, and we just talk. Except for things he doesn't want to say in present company. He likes to keep his secrets and mysteries about him and doesn't want to hand them to Mora for free. Some, it appears, not at all. I'll only find out which are which when we're out of here.

Remarkable: He still likes and wants me even as I talk more about myself and we spend time together and he gets to know all my moods and viewpoints and habits. Wasn't quite aware that was possible. But then, I wasn't aware everything else was possible either.

Quite often the mood's actually relaxed between us now. Right until lightning strikes and it's not anymore, and it'd be hard to deny I live for that by now. So I won't.

Chapter 10

I understood a shelf last night. (Short form for last time unit before I slept. Now it's post-sleep.)

I was tied up at the time, and Divayth noticed my distraction, so I told him; he said while that was exceedingly interesting, it wasn't as interesting as what he was going to do to me, and he was right (as he generally is with these things), so it slipped my mind again.

But I figured I'd write it down now.

It said "I don't know."

Chapter 11

Of course as it goes, now that I'm awake and more properly lucid and trying to concentrate, I can't replicate it. I know neither what it said, as in, what the whisper sounded like, in its own language, nor how I understood it nor how one gets transferred to the other, what the rules are, and so on. I do know for a fact it wasn't speaking Cyrodilic. Both the sound and the pattern in my mind when picking it up were different.

Frustrating.

And any attempt at transliterating anything they whisper all day long is futile. I'd need to at least read it in letters first before trying to figure out how to approximate the sounds in ours. Perhaps it's impossible. Though it doesn't sound that impossible to speak. So it should be possible to write. It doesn't quite make sense.

Anyway, since I won't be reading in here, that's not happening anytime soon.

Chapter 12

Caught another. An exchange.

“I don’t understand.” – “They like to talk.”

Talking about us? Most likely. Disconcerting but utterly unsurprising.

What this gives me is a basis to work with.

I still don’t know how I picked it up, but I understood some parts and principles.

Everything hangs on the subject, and the words themselves are plainer.

[Arrow diagrams follow]

If I wanted to write it as sentences, and get away from what my mind parsed and transformed into Cyrodilic patterns, it would be closer to this:

I: not, know.

I: not, into-know. (That’s what I understand to be “understand”.)

They: like, talk.

But it’s also couplets like this:

I: not. I: know.

I: not. I: into-know.

They: like. They: talk.

When it’s a double positive, like they like / they talk, it affirms each other. At the same time, the talk is as much an active verb as the like. Consequently, in this language (as far as I can tell), there is no liking something but not doing it. Or perhaps else, by liking something one is understood to be doing it.

For a negative, I not / I know, I not / I understand, the “I” gets an internal contrast applied to it. Whether that’s a negative or uncomfortable thing for its speakers, to have that contrast, or to say “I not”, I don’t know. (I: not, know.)

Divayth is giving me a quizzical look.

Of course. It's an obvious ploy. I understand that, despite the fascination.

We: like, talk.

I: into-know.

We enjoy talk, consequently I'm made to understand. If I'm not going to be looking into all the conveniently placed books and all. Harder to drown out what you hear and understand, and they've hit on a weak spot of mine, and now I want to understand more.

I'll talk it through with Divayth.

Chapter 13

Divayth is sceptical but not opposed.

“I know a number of unusual languages as well,” he said. “Most of that knowledge is not available without risk.” He regarded me for a while. “But I can no more lose you now than you can lose me. Be careful, and I’ll watch over you. And when I say you stop, you stop.”

“See, I would say yes to that. That’s sensible. What my worry is, is that I don’t know if I can choose not to understand and not to know.”

“Under normal circumstances it’s easy,” he said. “People do it all through their lives. It’s frequently frustrating. In this case, though, you’re right. If the knowledge and understanding is forced upon you by a Daedric Prince, and you would need a magical means of getting rid of it...” He pursed his lips, seemed to do some calculations in his head. “The price would be too high, unless I could find something novel I have not encountered yet. So let’s work with the situation at hand. You understand them.”

“Occasionally, a bit. And it seems the more I get, the more I can figure out.” I bit my lip. “There’s the issue, isn’t it? I should stop looking into it.”

“Can you honestly? Or does your mind do its work regardless of what you do?”

“Know what it’s like, huh.”

“Of course I do.” He paused, looked at me, leaned in for a brief kiss, and said, “I like having you.”

I smiled, impossibly charmed. “I love how you are.”

That gave me a smile in return, then he went serious again, leaning back and steepling his fingers. “If you can’t stop the knowledge, use it. It *is* power, after all, no matter the source and the intent.”

I nodded slowly. “See, I’m wondering if I want to agree cause that’s smart or cause it’s what I want to hear. Tables are turned, I definitely need your eyes on me. As unbiased as possible. In this, I mean. I like when you’re biased otherwise.”

A brief, thin smile. “I know you do. So do I. Well, I’ll do my best.” A pause again. “Teach me. Keeps you on the ground if you have to continue making sense. Explain it all in Cyrodilic. And you have less of a chance of disappearing into your own thoughts as people are wont to. You don’t want to turn into that wood elf down the hallway.”

“Indeed I don’t. Good, yes. I’ll teach you.” I leaned in. “Bet you don’t want to be left out, either. I wouldn’t either.”

“You know me too well.”

Chapter 14

One day / one meaningless unit of time, I had a thought. May have had it before, at the back of my head, but with exposure comes familiarity comes the ability to push those little bits of awareness further to the front, under your scrutinising gaze, the watcher's eyes, if you will.

"Sulan," I said, "come here."

My pocket watcher came flying over, did a loop in the air and settled by my shoulder. I reached up and pet a tentacle, one of the stabbing ones; I've gotten practice in navigating those and reading his mood as for when that was alright and not a dangerous move.

He made one of his usual sounds. But there it was. Not all that unintelligible at all.

I paused. How to approach this? "Sulan," I said, "I don't even know how to do a greeting, but let me try something." I then made an attempt at pronouncing the creatures' language that must have been compelling in its ridiculousness, to say "I: not, know. I: into-know."

Divayth was sitting in a close-by armchair writing something, but now he looked up at us, curiosity and amusement on his face.

Sulan gave off rapid watcher sounds while spinning in loops in his spot, something he usually did when he was in a mirthful mood. Maybe he was laughing.

"Can't blame you if you're laughing," I said. "What I tried to say was 'I don't know if I understand.' By which I mean bits of your language."

He spun around once more, and said something. It sounded familiar. But not quite...

His eyes all narrowed at the same time, or at least all the ones I could see from my angle, and he slowed down his speech. Repeated it. Once more, more slowly still. There it was. "You: into-know." You understand.

I felt a big grin spread on my face. "Watcher language."

An affirmative sound. As easy one I'd picked up on before we'd gotten to Apocrypha.

I tried to replicate it. Probably failed badly, cause Sulan was probably-laughing again.

"Does that mean 'Yes'?" I asked.

He did the sound again. "Yes?" I repeated his sound, badly.

He repeated it again, and added, "You: know." Yes, you know. Then he said it slowly, and slowed it down further and further until I could make out something I could attempt to say, even though I failed. A very small and simple sound to the ears, but immensely complex to speak for its condensed nature.

After what seemed like an eternity, we got it. Did the same for 'no'.

I saw Divayth watching us, his writing clearly forgotten, but amusement visible on his features, and something else. Something that looked suspiciously like pride.

Sulan wrapped a regular tentacle around the palm of my hand in a firm grip and moved our joined extremities up and down. A handshake. Hand- and tentacle-shake.

“Greeting,” I said.

“Yes,” he said, and uttered something brief and almost pronounceable. Repeat in slow, again.

“I”, I said, having picked up the component.

“Yes,” he said, and then shook my hand again.

“I greet you?”

“No. You: not.”

“I greet?”

“Yes.”

I thought about that for a moment. “I didn’t know if it was just the sentences I picked up. But you don’t seem to have an object, is that right?”

“Yes.” He twirled around, tentacles waving.

“So what do I say? I: greet. Does the ‘you’ just not happen?”

Sulan narrowed his eyes in apparent consideration. “I: greet. You:” And he reached over and took my pen. “Greet.”

I burst out laughing. Then I tried, still in Cyrodilic: I: greet. You: take, greet.”

Sulan spun around in a different way, looking happy. “Yes.”

“So you have no objects and no passive? One person does something, the other takes the deed. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting,” I muttered. “So... Whatever is done to someone, they actually took that deed. So they’re as much the agent.”

Sulan flew upwards a little, stretched out, his tentacles pointing arrow-sharply to the ground. “Yes. You: into-know.” Yes, you understand.

An eerie way of thinking, an alien language, and utterly fascinating.

Divayth put his writing down and moved over to us. “Teach me, too?”

I turned to Sulan. “Let’s do that, right?”

“Yes.”

So he taught us both how to greet, and then we got Divayth caught up on the pronunciations of the other ones. Well, and me, too. We’re still sounding pitiful and causing our friend a lot of spinning laughing fits.

Speaking of sound. “You still sound different from the shelves or whatever lives in the shelves,” I

remarked at some point. “Different dialect?”

His form contracted, his eyes simultaneously squinting, with a disdainful tentacle-wave in the direction of the shelves. “Yes.”

I grinned. “So we’d better learn yours then, right?”

“Yes.”

In some ways Daedra really are just like mortals.

Chapter 15

I get lax in journaling when routine sets in.

Times are good. We talk, we learn to speak Watcher and make slow progress. I get the occasional unbidden hint from Mora, but usually I manage to block it off and insist on learning on my own. Getting better at that. It *is* possible if you identify the tells and bring up the willpower.

Chapter 16

The shadowy tentacles have finally crawled out of their shelves and identified themselves; I reckon even they realised it was pointless to keep it up. They're watchers, of course. But they're unusual ones. Nothing solid, all shadow. And no eyes. Don't know what to make of that, and my Watcher comprehension isn't good enough to figure out what the matter is with them.

In any case, now that the charade is up, they're not in their shelves anymore.

"Well, I can't imagine we're terribly interesting to spy on," I said. "Just drop it and do... whatever else you'd be doing."

For some reason they followed. Usually this means they're congregating in a distant corner of the room, behind one of the shelf walls in the middle, occupied with their own business.

Sulan sticks with Sadis and us, either in our corner or otherwise with Sadis in their own corner behind their own shelf wall, cause I guess he sees more commonality with two dark elves and a Psijic wolf than these creatures that are just barely his own species.

Consider another point on the commonalities with mortals made.

Chapter 17

We did an experiment and went to Rowanith's room again. Tried speaking our newly acquired language's bits and pieces to her. Her eyes widened for a moment, and she talked back, nothing spectacular, just the recognition of fellow speakers of the tongue.

It's the same language she speaks, but I assumed the shelf shadow watchers' dialect, and Sulan later confirmed it.

She speaks a lot more fluently than us, seemingly without effort. But except for that one initial moment, her eyes stayed dull all the way through.

We left fairly soon. It was depressing to look at.

Back in our room, Divayth said, "You did well to insist on learning on your own."

"Thanks. You did well to encourage me."

That was all that needed saying on the topic.

Chapter 18

Been a while. We've learned a lot, and at last made a breakthrough in communication with the shadow watchers. Sulan helped a lot.

They got left behind in Nocturnal's realm once, in an investigation (spying) mission gone very wrong.

From what I can gather, Nocturnal decided to stage an example and turned them into something that befits her realm. Shadows instead of solid. And what do you decidedly not want in a realm of shadows and darkness and hidden everything? Lots of seeing eyes.

A chilling reminder of the forces we're dealing with here.

Mora took them back, as a matter of principle, but stuck them in the mostly-abandoned mortal quarters for minimum-invasive spy work on privileged guests. Or rather, delegated away and out of his sight.

"It looks different so you don't want it anymore," I remarked. "Daedra really do imitate mortals in everything."

"Won't happen to you with me," Divayth said.

I must have looked plenty surprised at that, and I was, and touched besides.

"Don't look at me like that," he said. "As if I couldn't say that kind of thing."

I felt a smile coming on. "You're right, I'm sorry. Thank you."

He pursed his lips. "Don't know why I'm saying it. I just had a momentary feeling that you needed to hear it."

I leaned against him, and he wrapped his arm around my waist.

"Won't happen to you either," I said. "Not with me."

He took my hand in his and kissed my fingertips. "Understood."

When I looked up, I saw two of the shadow watchers had moved closer to us again.

"Make yourselves at home," I said.

Sulan rolled a few of his eyes and translated to the pair, then talked to the whole group. I couldn't follow, but his tone was stern. Then he hovered back over to us and installed himself between our shoulders. Territory and rank claims. Of course.

The shadow watchers hesitantly scattered around the room, the initial pair that had approached us still lingering close-by, waving their tentacles seemingly expectantly.

Divayth looked at me with unconcealed amusement. "This is your problem now."

I had no idea what to do about the situation and thought to bridge it with a tired joke in Cyrodilic. “Do you like to play dice? We found some in the other room. I suppose we or Sulan can throw and translate the dice throws, cause you can’t see them.”

My impression is that they understand some, but not nearly all. They gestured at Sulan expectantly.

He translated.

That sparked an animated discussion that I couldn’t follow at all.

In the end, the dice idea was taken up, but they’ve created a shadow approximation of dice, so they can play on their own. They seem to be deciding on the result of the throw via its sound. Subtle differences. They’ve also occupied our low table. Each throw creates endless discussions.

And the solid, non-shadowy visitors to their realm, including Sulan, have been all but forgotten.

Chapter 19

Been a while again; I don't know how long.

We're both getting more fluent in Watcher and the intricacies hidden behind the first simple-seeming premise, so we've tried to have conversations in it. Turns out, very unsurprisingly, that it's best suited for scholarly pursuits, the recording and exchange of knowledge. It's still halting, and Sulan insists our pronunciation is bad, but as a pastime for two bored mages, it serves just fine. Might even become useful someday. Good to speak something few others do, when we're back in Nirn.

Here of course a lot of people speak it, and many of them are potentially quite dangerous. That dangerous potential is staying within narrow limits in our particular situation, though. Some of them are getting seriously dangerous at shadow dice.

Chapter 20

We almost had a fight break out in our little intellectual wasteland of a corner of Apocrypha.

Several of the shadow watchers were cheating at shadow dice, in their own unique ways.

One changed the perception of the sound of the dice throws from what it would have been to gain an advantage. (You hear the sound of a 6 thrown, no one will know it's a 2. It's now essentially a 6. Except to the onlookers with eyes, cause these guys simulate their dice with accurate looks despite not seeing them themselves.)

Another increased the weight on certain sides of the shadow dice so that the right numbers would fall – while still keeping the simulated laws of nature accurate, which they posited as a virtue and mandatory foundation of the game. Exploring the principles underlying the solid world was what this game was about, with no time for this small-minded rules-lawyering.

Yet another simulated gusts of wind during the throws, in the middle of this rather weather-less library back room, to knock the dice in the right direction. And then said there had been no wind; the dice had fallen as they must and as is Hermaeus Mora's will as everything that occurs in Apocrypha is.

Their companions were a lot less amused than we were.

I turned to Divayth. "Somehow this reminds me of something. I can't quite pin down what."

"One of the charms of Oblivion," he said, "lies with it being another of those places in which you can blaspheme without fearing repercussions. If you're the type to fear that sort of thing, of course."

When the discussion sounded a bit too angry to let it continue, I stepped in and demanded order and no aggression in this place, and they listened for some reason. At least for the moment. I suggested putting more elements of chance into it. One dice throw, and another from someone else for whether you keep that throw or it goes to a third party. Another throw from someone else to decide the third party. You cheat at your own risk.

This has caused a whole new level of tactics and intrigue that should keep them occupied for a while.

Chapter 21

It's one of those days. Or: Units of time between poor attempts at unrestful sleep filled with unpleasant and nonsensical dreams. Followed by unpleasant memories, and weird half-asleep-state thoughts disguising as unpleasant and nonsensical memories, in the form of visions. Complete nonsense, but enough to put me in a foul mood if I wasn't in one anyway.

When I was done being either generically testy or acting the recluse, I vented half-buried grievances about my life out there, and what was there even to go back to, my work doesn't matter, and my research will never go anywhere and doesn't matter either, and few people care about me at all, maybe two who might *actually* care, and one is already here and the other will die at some point, and we might too if we fail at our assorted projects, and everything is a sham I put on to pretend I don't know how pointless and empty my whole life is and really I am, too. And if I died here now, what difference would it make? And on days like this, I understand why men and Orcs typically die around my current age and get weary of living as the time comes.

Divayth listened and thought for a while. Then he said, "I'm too old not to have been there."

"I'm usually there," I said. "It's just normally background knowledge that I don't pay that much attention to while I go about my work. Sometimes it comes out."

"I've figured. You talk like that. I find it quite charming. Too much unfounded positivity is grating and too often coincides with wilful ignorance or stupidity. I can't have that around me for long."

I had to smile at that a little.

He steepled his fingers, watched me for a moment. "Your problem is that I want you for myself. If I'm being honest, I decided that on the first night I met you. And you've since agreed. So now you have an obligation. Keep to that, even if living is a chore."

I nodded before I'd thought about the answer. "Of course. Always comes down to that. I always choose living, for much worse reasons than this."

He looked around. "Though I will also admit it may be time to think about leaving. It's been how long? They should be done with their clean-up work by now. I didn't check. Time eludes me after a while."

"Me, too. Well. We both speak semi-fluent Watcher. I'd say it's been a while. As for out there... Diesala was always talking about how time runs differently between planes. And not regularly enough for conversion charts that'd make any sense."

"She's right about that. Would be, as a Psijic with Daedric realm experience. Well. Let's think about it."

My eyes wandered to the watchers conversing in another corner. I went over. "I don't know how this works. I don't know how much you listen or pick up at any time either. I still think we must be terribly uninteresting. But in case you heard any of our conversation just now, can you keep that quiet for now?"

They conversed briefly, then turned back to me almost as one, eerie. Said they had not heard a thing.

Chapter 22

We made some good headway in finding the way out at first, but at a certain point, things started getting rearranged. A challenge, fine. A childish one, but it's not like another few months or years are going to make a difference.

Chapter 23

Alright, so it's a challenge. Still a childish challenge, but a challenge nevertheless.

Chapter 24

This is starting to get on my nerves.

Chapter 25

You know...

Chapter 26

I'm not quite ready yet to doubt either of our intelligence, but I *am* annoyed at this situation.

Chapter 27

So something happened at last. Regrettably nothing of our own doing, but you get to the point where you stop caring as much.

One of the shadow watchers told us to gather everyone and follow her quietly. So we did. Led us through a labyrinth of corridors until we started hearing voices, arguing about our fate. Mora's voice for one. And it's been a while, but I recognised that of Salyn Darovi, who'd once helped me on a thing. Seemed like decades ago.

"You did not sneak in," Mora stated. "Which means you are on official business. I had thought Sotha Sil knew better than to get involved."

"Oh, he does. He tried not to," Salyn said.

"Sheogorath's then? He should know that these two fit better into my realm than his."

"Could have said that about me, too, when I was young. But that's not what this is about. We're not trying to poach them for anyone."

"Then tell me, on whose business are you here?"

"On whose business am I *not* here?" There was a tinge of annoyance in Salyn's voice, hard to tell if it was genuine. Sometimes he overdoes it for effect.

"Explain." Curt, but Mora made his voice echo through the halls anyway.

"So Lorkhan is annoyed at the situation, which you should guess apparently, according to his representative. Sil said he didn't want to get involved cause Divayth wouldn't want to be rescued by him, he'd want to do that himself, especially with his new lover involved. Some kind of pride and mage's rivalry thing. I got that more or less, I'd be the same. So we waited. Then Lorkhan's representative got pestered by a representative of Azura, who demanded someone step in at once before she does and things turn ugly."

Divayth gave me a curious look at that. I just shrugged. Never had anything to do with Azura. I've always liked her for her *lack* of direct involvement in anyone's affairs.

Salyn went on, "Now don't ask me what Azura has to do with this, but... You know, my mother used to worship her when she was alive. You don't turn down Azura when she's serious, or things *do* get ugly."

At that, Mora broke into booming laughter, a little unsettling. "I knew it," he said at last. "And so you complied."

"Well, not quite. First I had to ask my own patron if I could do that. He decided to let me go, and said all his efforts would be wasted if he didn't let me finish things, and that'd be boring."

"That sounds like Sheogorath. And at the same time: interesting. So then you went."

"No, first I made a deal with Azura, but I'm not telling you which, and then I got Sil to agree to let me go, and he agreed at last. And so I took the official Artaeum door in here. And now I'd like the

two mortals, please. Divayth Fyr and Lothryn Simero. And apparently, their pets. A psijic wolf named Sadis and a pocket watcher named Sulan. Lothryn's apprentice said they'd have them with them."

"And if I refuse?"

"Look, it's two mortals. Think of the list of people who care more than you do. Is that worth it?"

"What if I decide that it is?"

I heard Salyn's sigh. "Do any of us really want to deal with Azura? I know I don't. I really don't need that."

Silence. Then, "Fine. Take your mortals. It will be interesting to see what they bring to your little history after learning in my realm. And take those treacherous servants of mine while you're at it. They learned their loyalty from Nocturnal, it seems, as they did everything else."

So we got out. It was surprisingly easy then, with permission and official passage. Not that we'd contributed anything. But in the end it's alright.

Well, as Mora said, we contributed something to Tamriel's history, being a small population of blind shadow watchers. Nirn may yet come to regret this.

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